

Four Desirable Qualities for Teaching at a Small Liberal Arts College

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Davidson College is a private, liberal arts, baccalaureate college, located in Davidson, NC (just north of Charlotte). The 1700 students, all of traditional college age, hail from 46 states and 34 countries (4% are international). Half are men, 11% are students of color, 33% are on need-based financial aid. Davidson is a “highly selective” institution, consistently ranked by *US News and World Report* in the top 20 for national liberal arts colleges. The student/faculty ratio is 11:1. All of the 162 full-time faculty with tenure or on tenure-track have the highest degree in their field.

Recognizing that it is difficult to distill a long list of potentially desirable qualities, I have chosen to focus on four that I look for when selecting applicants to interview and subsequently hire as a new assistant professor.

Love Teaching—It’s not an Afterthought, It’s a Requirement

Although you can assert your love of teaching in cover letters and statements of teaching philosophy, there’s no substitute for actual experience. Full responsibility for teaching a course is better than being a teaching assistant, which is better than nothing. It is unlikely that you will have taught at a school comparable to Davidson (such schools do not tend to hire pre-PhD adjuncts or lecturers), but the closer you can come to that situation, the better. For example, if you can teach a section of a survey course (developmental, social, abnormal, etc.) at your PhD-granting university, even if your enrollment is 100 rather than our size of 30, that will make you more desirable than teaching a 500-person section of Introduction to Psychology (our size is 40) or teaching 30 students at a local community college (students are too different).

Be realistic about what courses you are prepared to teach. Unlike a department of just 2 or 3 people, one of our size (8-9 FTE) allows each person to specialize, so we expect you to

have extensive background for teaching your course list. Taking one graduate-level course in a topic is not sufficient. When candidates boast that they can teach anything in the discipline, our suspicions are aroused that the person does not understand the rigor of our courses or the caliber of our students.

Be truly interested in and capable of teaching at all undergraduate levels. Most members of the department teach Introduction to Psychology, a sophomore-level survey course, a junior-level research-intensive course, and a senior-level seminar. These courses call for different teaching styles and steadily increasing expectations about what students are capable of doing. Although new PhDs are unlikely to have had this breadth of experience, your statement of teaching philosophy or cover letter should yield cues about your preparedness. For example, you might articulate an active learning technique or assignment that you would propose in a course you could prepare.

We pay particular attention to candidates who attended a small liberal arts college or an honors college within a large university. We believe this gives them an edge in understanding the culture of the school: its size and its liberal-arts focus. Because you cannot go back in time to re-do your undergraduate experience, if you attended Enormous State University, you can compensate by articulating how you will get to know your students, accommodate their individual needs, take an interest in their futures, and support their non-psychology, non-academic life. Our faculty are expected to give essay questions on tests, have writing assignments, hold in-class discussions, and require challenging projects that will bring lots of students to your office for individualized help. To the extent that you have had similar experiences, you will be better prepared to teach at Davidson College. In the absence of such experience, you should be able to describe some realistic assignments that you would like to try out.

A liberal arts focus means, among other things, that students have a range of academic interests. To the extent that faculty share that breadth of focus, there is a desirable compatibility. Faculty office hours and open-door policies invite interaction with students

outside of class. If your research focus is so heavy that you do not have time to meet with students, your goals are incompatible with our interests.

Have a realistic idea of what the teaching load entails. Without graduate students, you are unlikely to have a teaching assistant, although you might have an undergraduate assistant if you teach statistics, and work-study/secretarial assistance will be available for some simple course-preparation chores. Schools of our caliber vary widely in the number of courses and different course preparations faculty will have per year. Being unfamiliar with a college's teaching expectations will make you seem at best, naïve, and at worst, unacceptable. Therefore, talk to faculty at undergraduate colleges before you hit the job market.

Have a Research Program Compatible with an Undergraduate Environment

Bright undergraduates will want to work on research projects, not merely as data collectors but as thoughtful, if inexperienced, collaborators. If your research is so highly specialized that only trained post-docs can be helpful or if it is done in settings to which undergraduates have no access, then we would not be interested in your candidacy.

Be interested in a broader range of research questions than you probably trained for in graduate school. Some students will approach you to supervise their senior thesis or other independent research on a topic in which they are interested, as well as to work with you on an ongoing project you have on-going. Although you would not be expected to accommodate all inquiries, you would be expected to supervise some.

Schools differ considerably in the space they can provide you and the research support they can offer. My school happens to be fairly well endowed on both counts. However, we do not pretend to compete with major research universities. If you need highly specialized and expensive equipment for your research, you had better be able to collaborate with others who have that equipment or to be able and willing to write grants to acquire it.

Scholarship is expected. It would be a mistake to assume that liberal arts colleges are interested only in classroom teaching. Successful candidates have several journal publications or have even co-authored book chapters before obtaining their PhD, especially if they have

lingered for a while in graduate school. Many colleges like mine would rank teaching and scholarship/research of equal importance, and the latter matters for promotion, tenure, and keeping yourself marketable in case the unthinkable happens. When we solicit outside reviews of an assistant professor's scholarship for tenure and promotion considerations, we say (and mean) "quality is more important than quantity." We judge favorably publications of textbooks or pedagogical aids, research on the pedagogy of teaching, as well as more traditional top-tier research journal articles. If you dislike research and think of teaching as a way to avoid doing any more, then you are not going to be happy or successful at a school like Davidson.

Have the Right Attitude

We value collegiality, collaboration, cooperation, and good departmental citizenship. To prepare yourself, you can gain experience by being on research or teaching teams, and you can serve on a graduate school committee. You could also be involved in professional associations' graduate student groups (e.g., APAGS or STP's Graduate Student Teaching Association) or help a professor put on a conference. Such activities can not only teach you more about the profession but also demonstrate your interest in committee or service work. To get past the paper application stage and be invited for an interview, you need to make sure these personal qualities are highlighted, most likely by those who write letters of recommendation for you.

Write Well

To be able to communicate effectively is important in every area of academic life, but at a college that emphasizes teaching in particular, you will probably be involved in some writing-across-the-curriculum initiative. Your own writing skills will be critically appraised, from your cover letter (which you have, of course, proofread) to your sample syllabi to your professional publications. If you are not currently a strong writer, get help until you are. The payoff for this hard work will be improvement in your ability to teach students to

communicate better, both in writing and orally, as both modalities require the same organizational skills and precision in thinking.